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Documentation

A Short Account of the Congregation of the Mission Published in 1656

[In a letter dated 7 February 1657, Saint Vincent de Paul wrote to Father Guillaume Delville, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission at Arras, to express his displeasure over the publication of an abridged history of the Congregation, "I feel such a strong pain about it that I cannot express it because it is something so contrary to humility to publish who we are and what we do."¹ He added that it was up to God alone to make known the good that the Congregation did. He concluded that "since there is no remedy, I will let the matter rest."² This account is dated 13 December 1656 and was sent from Paris to a pious person of Lille who wished to know more about the young community. It is the first known published account of the Congregation of the Mission. Toward the end reference is made to difficulties put in the way of publication by the superior, who relented only when convinced that it was the divine will. The authorship is unknown, but the presence of some inaccuracies and the generally idealized picture of the Congregation hints that the author may have been a non-Vincentian who obtained first hand information from a member of the Community. Saint Vincent apparently believed that Father Delville was involved.

Guillaume Delville entered the congregation on 19 January 1641 and was superior of the houses at Crecy and Montmirail before retiring to Arras in 1651. He died in 1658.³

*The following translation appeared in the **Annals of the Congregation of the Mission** 22 (1915):59-68, and has been edited and annotated by Father Stafford Poole, C.M.]*

¹ Pierre Coste, C.M., Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, entretiens, documents, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 6:176-77. Hereinafter cited as Coste, CED.

² Ibid., 177.

³ For biographical data on Delville, see Coste, CED, 2:492.

**Short Account of the Institute of the
Congregation of the Mission, Approved and
Confirmed by our Holy Fathers, Popes Urban VIII
and Alexander VII: Its Origin, Functions,
and Manner of Life to Attain Its End.**

Sent from Paris to a pious person of Lille who ardently desired to be informed of all particulars concerning the manner of life followed in this Congregation. All for the glory of God and the good of his Church.

Preface

This account, dear reader, having fortunately fallen into my hands, I read it attentively and was so deeply moved that I considered myself to be bound in conscience to publish it in order that those who read it may praise and bless the infinite goodness of God in giving to his Church, during this past century that has been so filled with miseries and calamities, a congregation of men who, freed from all self-interest, devote themselves unreservedly to promoting his glory and the salvation of souls.

Farewell and pray for the person who presents this to you.

* * *

The purpose of the institute of the Congregation of the Priests of the Mission is to lead its members to labor all their lives not only for their own perfection by the observance of the rules and constitutions, but also for the salvation of the poor country people by means of missions, and for the advancement of the clergy by means of seminaries, retreats for ordinands, conferences, spiritual retreats, and other functions.

This Congregation is composed of priests, clerics, and laymen.⁴ Although all lead a very regular life, they are not religious, in order that they be more entirely under the control of the bishops and thus render them more ample service in their dioceses, as also to form closer relations with the clergy - all for the greater glory of God and the good of his Church.⁵

⁴ That is, lay brothers.

⁵ This is not accurate. Although Saint Vincent had sought exemption from episcopal control, at least with regard to internal life, for the Congregation of the Mission as early as 1628, it was not granted until 22 September 1655 in the bull *Ex Commissa Nobis* of Pope Alexander VII, which approved the vows of the Community. This exemption was on a level with that of religious communities.

The missions were begun over thirty-five years ago, but there was as yet no community devoted to this work. God made use of Monsieur Vincent de Paul and of the late wife of the General of the Galleys to lay the first foundations of this Congregation.⁶ The knowledge that both had of the crying need of the country people for instruction and general confession inspired them with the thought of seeking a remedy for this great evil which, in their opinion, caused the loss of most of these poor people.

They felt all the more strongly urged to follow the inspiration after the death of a peasant who, before dying, told them that he would have been lost if he had not taken their advice and made a general confession.⁷ Hence they resolved to procure the same benefit to all the other parishioners and as a matter of fact, the said Monsieur Vincent de Paul preached a sermon on the subject and spoke so effectively that all desired to make a general confession. They did so after being properly instructed and prepared by several sermons and catechetical instructions.

So many were the blessings showered by God upon the work that this good lady wished to have it repeated throughout her domains. This was done accordingly and in order to perpetuate so great a benefit, God inspired her to make a foundation by which six priests would be obliged to give missions every five years in all the towns and villages of her estates.⁸

Having offered this foundation to several religious communities, not one of which accepted it, she was obliged to give it to secular priests who would agree to live together as a congregation with the said Monsieur Vincent as their superior.⁹ This was done and approved by the archbishop of Paris about twenty-eight years ago,¹⁰

⁶ Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, Madame de Gondi. She was the wife of Phillippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, Count de Joigny and General of the Galleys. Saint Vincent entered their household as chaplain and tutor to their children in 1613.

⁷ The standard account of this sermon and mission as given by Saint Vincent can be found in Coste, CED, 11:2-5 and 12:7-8. On another occasion, 25 January 1655, he described the first sermon of the mission as resulting, not from the experience of the peasant of Gannes but from Madame de Gondi's experience with a priest who did not know the formula of absolution. See Coste, CED, 11:169-71.

⁸ By foundation here is meant endowment. In her will Madame de Gondi had a clause which set up an endowment of 16,000 *livres* for any community that would preach missions to the rural poor. See Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M. 3 vols. (Westminster, MD, 1952) 1:44-45 and José María Román, *San Vicente de Paúl: I. Biografía* (Madrid, 1981), 164-65. The endowment did not provide for six priests, whom the author has confused with the six who composed the nucleus of the original Congregation.

⁹ The initial contract establishing the Congregation of the Mission, dated 17 April 1625, can be found in Coste, CED, 13:197-202.

¹⁰ The act of approbation, dated 24 April 1626, can be found in Coste, CED, 13:202-03.

and God so blessed the undertaking that within a short time the number of priests considerably increased and they were enabled to give missions in other places besides those of the said lady, notably in the diocese of Paris.

The blessings bestowed by God on the works of this Congregation became known to the Holy Father, Pope Urban VIII. His Holiness graciously deigned to approve it by a bull in the year 1634.¹¹

Since the time of the approbation, the said Congregation has spread so widely that it now numbers twenty-two houses in France, Italy, Poland, Savoy, Barbary and Lorraine.¹² It was established in Rome over ten years ago.¹³ All of its houses are under the direction of the said Monsieur Vincent, who is the superior general of the said Congregation.

The principal advantage is that the Missionaries¹⁴ are not a charge to anyone, neither to the public nor to individuals. Up to the present they have not received the least remuneration in the course of their missions. Their institute obliges them to refuse even the smallest gift.

To be admitted into the Congregation, two years of probation are required, during which the aspirant labors to perfect himself. After that he is received and becomes a member of the said Congregation by a promise of stability.¹⁵

All kinds of persons are received gratis into their house¹⁶ for a spiritual retreat of seven or eight days during which they are instructed to make a general confession and to draw up a rule of life for the future.

¹¹ This is somewhat misleading. Saint Vincent took the initiative in seeking papal approval for the congregation of the Mission. The negotiations began in 1628 and lasted four years. The papal bull of erection, *Salvatoris Nostri*, is dated 12 January 1632 but since the Roman year began on 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, it was issued in 1633 by modern reckoning. See Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:156-59 and Román, *San Vicente de Paúl*, 212-23. For the text of the bull, see Coste, CED, 13:257-67.

¹² Barbary refers to North Africa, specifically Tunisia and Algeria. Lorraine was not part of France at this time.

¹³ The Vincentians took up residence in Rome in 1641.

¹⁴ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term Missionary was used almost exclusively to designate members of the Vincentian Community and was the equivalent of a proper name.

¹⁵ This is inaccurate because membership in the Congregation of the Mission has traditionally begun with reception into the internal seminary (the equivalent of the novitiate in religious communities). The four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability were approved in 1655 by the bull *Ex Commissa Nobis* (see note 5 above).

¹⁶ This apparently refers to Saint Lazare, the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris.

Philosophy and theology are taught but only to those who are in this establishment and in their seminaries. Church music is also taught according to the Roman method, together with all the ceremonies of low and high mass and even the manner of hearing confessions, preaching, and catechizing.

**On the First End of this Congregation,
which is to labor at one's own perfection.**

The Missionaries must especially strive to perfect themselves in the knowledge and virtues necessary for their functions. The virtues which they strive chiefly to acquire are humility, simplicity, meekness, zeal for souls, and obedience.

They rise at four o'clock and make an hour's meditation together in the church. The particular examen [examination of conscience] is made twice daily and the general examen in the evening at eight o'clock before retiring. Every week a conference on some virtue is given, every month an interior communication is made, and every year the exercises of a spiritual retreat of eight or ten days are carried out.¹⁷

The priests offer the holy sacrifice according to the order indicated but in those houses in which a seminary is established, high mass is celebrated and vespers sung and this only on Sundays and festivals. But where there are ordinands solemn mass is sung daily.

The fundamental rules which are inviolably kept [by the Missionaries] are:

1. To be obedient to the bishops in whatever concerns the missions and other works of the Congregation directed toward the neighbor;
2. To be submissive to the pastor during the course of the missions and to do nothing in the parish without his consent;
3. To be a charge to no one, neither to the people nor to private individuals and to accept no remuneration for their labors;
4. To preach to no others in their churches except the retreatants and ordinands, to hear their confessions but not those of others, especially in the large cities, in order that they may devote themselves to the country people, for this is their principal duty.
5. During the mission, always to yield the honor of preaching to the other priests who may offer to do so;

¹⁷ This refers to a manifestation of conscience to a spiritual director or, at that time, to a superior.

6. To practice blind and prompt obedience in going wherever the superior sends them, even to the Indies, as has in truth been done for ten or twelve years.¹⁸ For, besides those in Tunis, Barbary, Algiers, where they expose their lives for the bodily and spiritual relief of the poor slaves, there are others who are in the Hebrides, near England, striving to instruct the people who, though Christians, live like savages, for they have had neither priest nor minister among them for over fifty years. There are also two Missionaries in the mountains of Scotland, laboring for the conversion of heretics.¹⁹ Seven or eight years ago, two others were sent to the island of Madagascar beyond the Cape of Good Hope.²⁰ Several of the islanders were baptized by them and one of the Missionaries died through the excessive zeal he exercised towards those poor people.²¹ A few days ago two priests and a layman of the same Congregation set out to help the other Missionary who is the only priest to be found on the island.²²

On the Second End of this Congregation, which is to labor for the salvation of the country people.

The means employed by the said Congregation to promote the salvation of the country people is the work of the missions which they [the Missionaries] carry on in the places where they are asked.

The shortest mission lasts from two to three weeks. This is given in small villages, but in the large villages it extends from six weeks to two months, during which a sermon is preached, morning and evening, and an instruction for children given at midday. The rest of

¹⁸ The author seems to be using the term Indies in a wide sense to refer to any foreign mission field. The Vincentian Community had no men or establishments in the New World until the nineteenth century.

¹⁹ Father Dermot Duggan worked in the Hebrides from 1615 until his death in 1657. Father Thomas Lumsden (the first Scot to enter the Congregation of the Mission) worked in the Orkney Islands and northern Scotland and Father Thomas White was the apostle of the Highlands. For the most part they did not attempt to convert Protestants but tried to preserve Catholicism among the Scots.

²⁰ These were Fathers Charles Nacquart and Nicholas Gondrée, who left for Madagascar in 1648.

²¹ This was probably Father Claude Dufour, a somewhat unstable person who died of a fever in 1656 after attempting to plant twelve crosses in twelve different villages in the pestilential island, Ile Sainte Marie.

²² These were Father Charles Boussordec and François Herbron and Brother Christophe Delaunay. They left from Nantes on 31 October 1657 but were shipwrecked the next day. They never reached Madagascar. This part of the account must have been written shortly after that but never revised before printing.

the day is spent in hearing general confessions, reconciling contending parties, visiting the sick, distributing leaflets on the *Exercises of a Christian*, and bestowing alms on those most in want.

Toward the close of the mission there is a general communion, especially for the young people of the parish. A sermon is given for this purpose and in the evening a procession is organized and the blessed sacrament carried. This ceremony closes with a short sermon. So touching are these devotions that many admirable conversions are the result. In every mission a plenary indulgence is gained by all who, having gone to confession and received communion, pray for the needs of the Church.

On their arrival as well as on their departure, [the Missionaries] ask the blessing of the pastor or if he is absent, his vicar. If possible, they establish in every mission a Confraternity of charity for the bodily and spiritual relief of the sick poor, to which the women and girls devote themselves by turns.

They have, moreover, founded a community called the Daughters of Charity, who are employed in visiting and caring for the sick poor in the parishes and hospitals where they are established.²³ They bring them food and other necessities. They also take charge of foundlings, teach poor girls to read, care for the sick who come to them, give them the needed relief and medicine, and exercise other works of mercy towards them. All this is under the direction of the said Congregation.

The house of Paris [Saint Lazare] has several other works devoted to the bodily and spiritual assistance of the poor. It cares especially for those who are suffering from the effects of the war raging on the frontiers of France, where there are several priests and laymen [that is, brothers] employed in aiding the sufferers spiritually and corporally.²⁴

²³ The author is speaking in very generic terms, perhaps to enhance the reputation of the Congregation of the Mission or not to offend Saint Vincent's sense of humility. It was Saint Vincent himself, not the Vincentian Community, who founded the Daughters of Charity.

²⁴ France joined the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in 1635. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648), war continued with Spain until 1659. At the same time France was rocked by the civil war called the Fronde (1648-1653). Saint Vincent sent relief to Lorraine, Picardy, Artois, and the Ile de France.

On the third end of the said Congregation, which is to labor for the reform and sanctification of the clergy

The means employed in the said Congregation for the reform and sanctification of the clergy are the following.

When the Mission is founded and established in a diocese, all [sic] who present themselves for ordination are, through the good pleasure of the bishop, received at the said Mission for twelve or fifteen days in order to be well trained both in the knowledge and in the fervor required for the worthy reception of the sacrament of holy orders.

During this time the ordinands rise at half past four o'clock, then make meditation for half an hour. At five o'clock they are taught how to meditate. At six, they say the little hours together.²⁵ They then put on surplices and go to the church in silence with great decorum and recollection to attend mass, which is sung as solemnly as possible, in order to impress upon them the greatness and dignity of this grand and admirable sacrifice.

After mass, all return to a large hall where an hour's instruction is given, after which they separate into bands of ten or twelve, each band receiving a special instruction on the subject already treated, so that it may be still more deeply engraved on their minds.

At eleven o'clock dinner is served, during which is read *The Perfection of Priests* by Molina the Carthusian.²⁶ An hour's wholesome conversation follows, during which they are entertained on pious subjects and thus taught the manner of conversing profitably with their neighbor.

Vespers and compline follow, after which they are taught the ceremonies of high and low mass. At four o'clock another instruction is given, and they then say matins and lauds for the next day. After supper there is an hour's conversation, as at midday.

At eight o'clock they assemble for general examen and prayers, after which all retire in silence.

During their stay at the Mission they perform the same exercises at the same hour but in a different way each day. He who preaches in the morning speaks on the principal parts of moral theology, and he who instructs in the afternoon on the virtues necessary to live a

²⁵ According to the arrangement of the Roman Breviary at that time, the little hours consisted of the daytime prayers, that is, prime, terce, sext, and none.

²⁶ Antonio de Molina (c. 1550-1612) was a Spanish Carthusian and the author of numerous ascetical treatises. The work referred to was a French translation of his *Instrucción de sacerdotes*, which went through more than twenty editions in Spanish and other languages.

good priestly life. On the first day, he speaks on the obligation incumbent on priests to meditate daily, showing how to do this and giving the means to perform the exercises well.

On the second day, he impresses them with the importance of refraining from embracing the ecclesiastical state when not called to it by God. He describes the signs of a true vocation as well as the means of ascertaining these signs, which are either ordinary or extraordinary.

On the third day he speaks on the necessity of a priest's possessing the spirit of his state, what it consists of, and the means to acquire and preserve it in order to discharge his priestly functions properly.

Every day he touches on decorum, sobriety, zeal for the salvation of souls, charity, humility, chastity, uprightness, care and diligence in reciting the divine office, celebrating mass, hearing confessions, preaching, catechizing and finally, outlines the perfection that should characterize a priest and gives explanations of each one of the orders.

Four days before receiving holy orders, the ordinands make a general confession with great fervor and receive communion the next day. On Saturday they are taken to the bishop's residence to be ordained.²⁷ All are edified by their piety and decorum.

On the Sunday following the ordination, a solemn high mass is sung, after which a sermon is preached to exhort the newly ordained to persevere in their good resolutions.

These exercises are made four times before the ordinands are raised to the priesthood,²⁸ and the wonderful fruits derived cannot be enumerated, any more than the beneficial effects produced upon those who behold them afterwards leading exemplary lives and the greater number of living as saints.

The principal resolution taken by them at the close of these exercises is to promise to come every year to the Mission to make an eight or ten days spiritual retreat, and also to choose a [spiritual] director, to go to confession twice a week, and to instruct the people, which they generally do with much fruit.

²⁷ This refers to the fact that in that era ordinations were customarily performed on the Saturdays of the Quarter Tenses, or Ember Days, which were special penitential days that occurred four times in the liturgical year. Orders were frequently conferred in the bishop's private chapel, as in the case of Saint Vincent himself, who was ordained to the priesthood in the private chapel of the bishop of Périgueux.

²⁸ That is, before tonsure-minor orders, subdiaconate, diaconate, and priesthood.

In order to perfect the clergy still more, a conference is held every week in the said Mission, attended by many good and pious priests of all conditions. In these conferences spiritual subjects are discussed with the greatest sweetness, decorum, reverence, and piety. When one person speaks, he is listened to with close attention. Each one speaks in his turn, and all that can be said on a virtue is brought forward with admirable profit.²⁹

The conference is opened with the *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* and closed with the *Sub tuum praesidium*.³⁰ It ordinarily lasts about three hours.

The said Congregation has also established conferences in each deanery. Every two weeks the priests assemble at the appointed place and the same order is followed as in the house of the said Congregation. The Mission, moreover, has erected seminaries in which ecclesiastical students are trained to all functions both for the acquisition of virtue and of knowledge, taught how to preach, and in a year or two are fitted to lead holy lives suitable to their calling.

To be of still greater benefit to the Church, the said Congregation has likewise founded minor seminaries in which boys are educated and reared in the fear of God. These establishments are like conservatories, and from them good workmen have come forth to labor in the vineyard of our Lord.³¹

Finally, there is great union among the members of this Congregation, although many are from different countries. There are no dissensions or divisions but only peace and charity accompanied by a holy emulation.

No mention is made here of the blessings which God has bestowed and which he continues to bestow upon the works of this little Congregation, because it strives especially to honor the hidden life of our Lord, leaving to divine providence the care of making known the good done in it. For God himself is its author. Therefore to him is due all the glory and to us only confusion.

²⁹ The reference is to the Tuesday Conferences, a type of confraternity established by Saint Vincent at Saint Lazare for an elite corps of priests. The Missionaries established them in other cities of France where they had houses.

³⁰ This was different from later Vincentian practice, which ended spiritual exercises with the Marian prayer *Maria Mater Gratiae*.

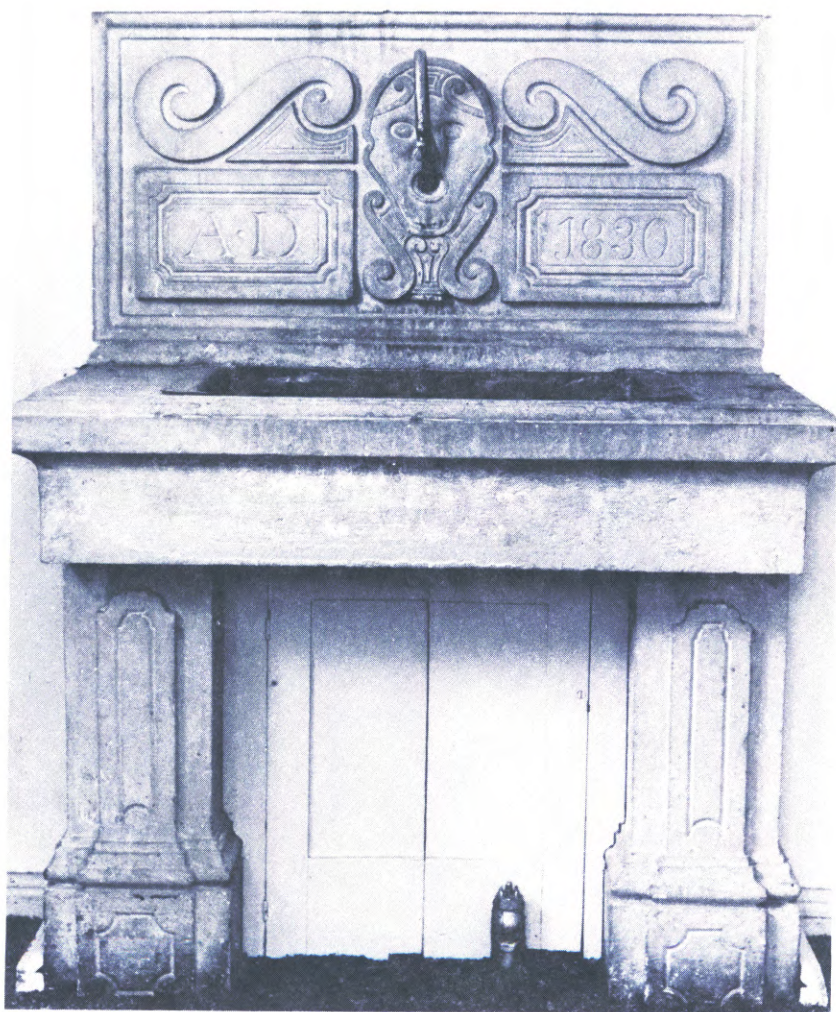
³¹ The Vincentian Community's experience with minor seminaries in France was not a successful one. Saint Vincent established one at Saint Lazare, the seminary of Saint Charles, which received both lay students and candidates for the priesthood. It lasted from 1645 to 1685. Generally, Saint Vincent was skeptical about their effectiveness.

This is partly why an account of this institute was never before published, for the superior made some difficulty about permitting the one who wrote it to do so and allowed it only after recognizing it to be the will of God by the persistence of him who asked it and by the pious end for which he so ardently desired it.

APPROBATION. This short account of the institute of the Congregation of the Mission may be freely printed. Given at Douai, 13 December 1656.

Martinus Denys

Doctor of Theology and royal professor.



Stone washbasin carved by Brother Angelo Oliva, C.M. Sacrisity, seminary church, Perryville, Missouri.